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Assaulting Sophia, Protecting Sophia: the Female Body as a Symbolic Artifact in Gnostic Mythology

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Abstract

This article explores the construction and function of the female body in four Gnostic texts: *Pistis Sophia*, *On the Origin of the World*, *Hypostasis of the Archons*, and *Apocryphon of John*. In these texts' accounts of the mythological origin of the cosmos, the exposed bodies of Sophia and her daughters are consistently depicted as objects of excessive, often gratuitous sexual violence. Yet in the midst of this violence appears another, equally consistent motif: the Gnostic writers protected their female characters through a variety of narratival techniques, such as transforming the female body into a tree or a strenuous insistence on the violence's ultimate failure. This article accounts for this curious pairing of violence and protection by evaluating the female body as a symbolic artifact embedded with the values of the patriarchal culture which constructed it, a culture which valued the female body as a reliable, untainted conduit of progeny.

Keywords

Gnosticism – Sophia – Eve – female body – sexual violence – patriarchy – Discourse Theory

1 From Chokmah to Sophia

“Those who eat of me will hunger for more.”¹ When Wisdom appears in early Jewish texts, she is no mere abstract concept. She is a woman, and it should

¹ Sirach 24.21.

perhaps come as no surprise that her depictions therefore teem with imagery heavily laced with sexuality and possession so surreptitious, she might blush to hear her depiction dancing on the tongues of these first admirers. “She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her,” says the proverb. “Nothing defiled gains entrance into her,” warns Pseudo-Solomon.² Even when Wisdom’s name transformed from the Hebrew *Chokmah* to the now-familiar Greek *Sophia*, her essential depiction did not. Sophia continued to be pursued, entered, and made one’s own, the highest prize of the wisest men.³

In the early centuries of the Common Era, this highly sexualized language collides with the subversive hermeneutic of Gnostic mythology, resulting in an acceleration of this imagery latent in the original texts. Wisdom is no longer possessed in a loving embrace; instead, Sophia is sexually assaulted by grotesque enemies and leering monsters. In the midst of the excessive, sometimes gratuitous violence unleashed upon the female body appears an equally consistent motif: narratival techniques—as in, fictional or fantastic elements within the narrative—employed by the Gnostic writers to protect their female characters. Male aggression and male protection: at the center of both, the unwitting object of their volition, is a woman. The purpose of this article is to account for this remarkable pairing of forces enacted on Sophia’s body by evaluating the female body as a symbolic artifact embedded with the values of the patriarchal culture which constructed it.⁴

I begin by locating my argument within a continuing conversation about Gnosticism and its interaction with a historical context that was patriarchal, defined as “a social system where males dominate and have authority over women as a group.”⁵ Specifically, I join other scholars in challenging the assumption that Gnosticism’s inclusion of the divine feminine signifies a feminist victory, that Gnosticism has somehow withstood the patriarchal values of its Hellenistic milieu. Next is a historical description of that milieu’s assessment of the female body as a conduit for reproduction and ensuing insistence that this body be protected from any forces exterior to and aggressive toward the patriarch.

The final and largest portion of this article offers a close reading of four texts which narrate Sophia’s participation in the mythological origins of the cosmos:

² Prov 3:18; Ps Sol 7.25.

³ For the classic discussion on the Jewish background of Sophia mythology, see MacRae 1970.

⁴ Anthropologists have long investigated the interaction between the body and the culture with which it interacts. E.g. Csordas 1990, 11.

⁵ Yee 2018, 4. It should be noted that discussion on the definition and even usefulness of the term *patriarchy* is ongoing and robust. See Walby 1990, 20; Rich 1995, 57; Schüssler Fiorenza 2016, 362, 365; Hartman 1981, 14.

Pistis Sophia (fifth century CE) and a trio from the third century CE Nag Hammadi collection, *On the Origin of the World*, *Hypostasis of the Archons*, and the *Apocryphon of John*. Within these texts, I am interested in a curious consistency: in the midst of acts of sexual aggression, the Gnostic authors are unfailingly keen to preserve Sophia's untainted reproductive capacity via narratival techniques that protect her body from the full ramifications of sexual assault.

It is at this point, in this pairing of violence and protection enacted on the female body, that the authors' historical and patriarchy-infused context is most apparent, as is that context's influence on the stories. The authors' ideological interest in the female body proves to be identical to that of the ideology of its historical context: the female body is vulnerable to violence and thus must be protected from that violence by any means necessary, not for its own sake, but for the sake of what it might carry on behalf of the patriarch. Despite the scholarly hope that Gnostic communities dodged the patriarchal devaluation of women, the opposite is true, a conclusion embodied in Sophia's body and the pairing of violence and protection simultaneously enacted upon it.

2 A High-Ranking Female Goddess: What Can She Tell Us?

Gnostic mythology begins with the Father, but he is not alone for long. He is quickly joined by his consort Barbelo, the manifestation of his self-aware thought, an (often androgynous) female, a "kind of gnostic mother goddess."⁶

This is the first power which was before all of them
which came forth from his mind.
She is the forethought of the All
her light shines like his light
the perfect power which is the image of the invisible
virginal Spirit who is perfect.
The first power,
the glory of Barbelo,
the perfect glory in the aeons,
the glory of the revelation,
She glorified the virginal Spirit and it was she who praised him,
because thanks to him she had come forth.
This is the first thought, his image;

⁶ Rudolph 1983, 80.

She became the womb of everything,
for it is she who is prior to them all.⁷

The presence of the divine feminine in Gnostic mythology is not itself remarkable: goddesses were ubiquitous in ancient mythology. The inclusion of the feminine in Gnostic mythology is most noteworthy *in contrast to* the model of the emerging orthodox Christianity, in which the Godhead—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—is entirely male. Elaine Pagels writes that despite the unmistakable Jewish heritage of Gnostic mythology, “instead of describing a monistic and masculine God, many of these texts speak of God as a dyad who embraces both masculine and feminine elements.”⁸ Such duality is not merely academic. This duality is significant in its potential ability to reveal the historical situation of the historical audience.

Scholars of Gnosticism have long hypothesized a sort of “trickle-down” effect in Gnostic communities: a high-ranking female goddess within the texts could indicate high-ranking females in the historical contexts producing the texts. Kurt Rudolph concludes, “The percentage of women was evidently very high and reveals that Gnosis held out prospects otherwise barred to them, especially in the official church ... Presumably the prominent position of Sophia and other female beings in the gnostic systems is connected with this.”⁹ For this aspect of its mythology, then, scholars have often applauded Gnosticism for scoring a significant win for femininity and against patriarchy, “saving Christianity for feminism,” as Elizabeth A. Castelli so wryly puts it.¹⁰ Not all scholars agree, however, and demonstrate that the connection between spiritual and social hierarchies is not quite so clear. R. Joseph Hoffman’s systematic investigation of Pagels’ claims concludes, “There is nothing in the Nag Hammadi documents to suggest that the gnostics used their creation and redemption myths as theoretical undergirding for improving the status of women within their communities.”¹¹ Furthermore, April DeConick and Gershom Scholem have long insisted that neither proto-orthodox Christianity nor Judaism needed to be “saved for feminism.”¹²

⁷ Apoc. John NHC II 4:31–5:1 (Waldenstein and Wisse 1995, 11). All English translations of Coptic text are my own. Descriptions of this androgynous female (a phrase used entirely without irony) abound in Gnostic texts: Barbeliotes, to use a heresiological term, “is one of the largest groups in Gnosis.” Rudolph 1983, 80.

⁸ Pagels 1979, 49.

⁹ Rudolph 1983, 212. See also Williams 1986, 197.

¹⁰ Castelli 1988, 366.

¹¹ Hoffman 1983, 303. See also Wisse 1988.

¹² DeConick 2011 and Scholem 1991.

What do we do with a high-ranking female goddess? What, if anything, can she tell us about the historical conditions lurking behind her myth? Most important to the purposes of this article, to what extent does she indicate the ability of communities to overcome the bounds of normalized patriarchy? For many years, wider scholarship hypothesized that these goddesses could tell us quite a bit, up to and including a prehistorical matriarchy where women were in charge.¹³ Although archaeology for many years seemed to confirm this heady conclusion, unfortunately this is no longer the case.¹⁴ In its place is rising suspicion: feminist scholars are increasingly wary that texts created by and for powerful males can be reliable witnesses to women who exist independent of that power.¹⁵ “What is the relationship of a text to the society that spawned it?” wonders Carole Fontaine. “Dare we assume a simple, one-to-one correspondence between literary symbol and social reality? Can a patriarchal text speak truth about the reality of women’s lives?”¹⁶ When Fontaine evaluates various genres for reliable evidence of social reality, she ranks mythological texts at the very bottom.

This suspicion in Gnosticism scholarship in particular is already underway, especially in the work of scholars who pay close attention to gendered language and the way this language constructs characters. Richard Smith demonstrates that when the Gnostic goddess Sophia is at her most salvific, she displays male attributes.¹⁷ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has shown that the very language fundamental to Gnostic ideology is indeed highly gendered:

In gnosticism, the pneumatics, [human] men and women, represent the female principle, while the male principle stands for the heavenly realms, Christ, God and the Spirit. The female principle is secondary, since it stands for the part of the divine that becomes involved in the created world and history. Gnostic dualism shares in the patriarchal paradigm of

¹³ See de Beauvoir 1949, 64; Foley 1994, 204.

¹⁴ See Pomeroy 1995’s fully cited discussion on recent archaeological studies, x–xi. The trajectory of matriarchal prehistory’s inception and reception is lucidly outlined in Holmes 2012, 143ff. Lynn Meskell’s conclusions are unequivocal: “It is unfortunate that many archaeologists interested in gender are drawn to historical fiction and emotional narratives, which either replace or accompany serious archaeological dialogues. At this juncture sound feminist scholarship needs to be divorced from methodological shortcomings, reverse sexism, conflated data and pure fantasy, since this will only impede the feminist cause and draw attention away from the positive contribution offered by gender and feminist archaeologies.” Meskell 1995, 74, 83.

¹⁵ E.g., Pomeroy 1995, 4, 8–9; Salisbury 2001, 166–9; Gilhus 1983, 38.

¹⁶ Fontaine 1990, 71.

¹⁷ Smith 1988, 358ff.

Western culture. It makes the first principle male, and defines femaleness relative to maleness. Maleness is the subject, the divine, the absolute; femaleness is the opposite or the complementary 'other'.¹⁸

Her research answers the assertion of scholars such as Williams that "although the author uses gender-related images, he or she is not trying to make a statement about the social or religious meanings of gender."¹⁹ What Williams does not sufficiently consider, and what Schüssler Fiorenza discloses, is that *any* gender imagery is itself a statement about the social or religious meaning of gender.

This article joins scholars such as Smith and Schüssler Fiorenza in maintaining that myths do have something to say about historical reality, while also insisting that it is the gendered language used in the construction of these myths that is the most fertile ground for understanding that historical reality. Admittedly, the semiotics which subtend any reading of the "real" in ancient societies can indeed be fraught, for the very tools which provide access to "historical reality" are ironically the very barriers limiting that access. The nuances of the lived reality of historical families and of the relations between men and women will always exceed that which can be captured in textual ideology, and what appears in the texts as a straightforward "isolation" of the body would perhaps be reframed as "protection" in a context of historical parental concern. Such an insistence on nuance is especially crucial post-Foucault, who demonstrated that power is neither linear nor unidirectional but rather a network of interacting practices, institutions, and technologies.²⁰

This cognizance is why a feminist reading of these texts—given feminism's special concern for the female body and how it is constructed—is so well-suited to them. Because the female body is a lightning rod for the intersection between text and lived experience and "significantly more vulnerable than male bodies to extremes in cultural manipulation of the body," the female body is a highly accessible starting point.²¹ Like anthropologists Schepers-Hughes and Lock, "We will begin from an assumption of the body as simultaneously a physical and symbolic artifact, as both naturally and culturally produced, and as securely anchored in a particular historical moment."²² Furthermore, because the body is a constructed artifact, it can therefore migrate with

¹⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza 1994, 274.

¹⁹ Williams 1986, 214.

²⁰ Bordo 1993, 167.

²¹ Bordo 1993, 143.

²² Schepers-Hughes 1987, 7. Sociologist Victoria Pitts-Taylor 2016 writes elsewhere that bodies are "historically situated, socially stratified, and differentially experienced" (9).

remarkable stability between historical and literary contexts. To say it another way, the body's construction in Gnostic texts will replicate with notable consistency its construction in its "particular historical moment." It is to a description of this historical moment and the female body's role within it that this article now turns.

3 The Construction of the Female Body in Antiquity

Although the historical context of Gnostic mythology is third century CE Rome and later, nearly all scholarly discussion of sexual assault in Greco-Roman culture begins in ancient Athens, where a woman's role is best framed in terms of duty rather than in terms of rights.²³ Citizen women in Athens had a duty to the stability of the *polis* or city, a duty fulfilled by contributing to the stability of her *oikos*, or household. Strong, independent families with solid ancestry and progeny produced a strong, independent state.²⁴ A woman's role in Athens, then, was directly tied to her body's ability to produce heirs.

The word *produce*, however, is not entirely accurate. Women did not *produce* heirs; women *carried* heirs. Because any knowledge of the mammalian ovum was still far in the future, a woman's role in reproduction was almost entirely passive, a waiting vessel for the male seed which would provide anything of true value. The oft-cited words of the fifth century BCE Aeschylus provide a striking backdrop for the discussion: "The so-called 'mother' is not a parent of the child, only the nurse of the newly-begotten embryo. The parent is he who mounts; the female keeps the offspring safe, like a stranger on behalf of a stranger, for those in whose case this is not prevented by god."²⁵ Although the woman's role gradually evolved in the medical understanding of reproduction and her seed assumed an increasingly active role, this medical knowledge did not fully translate into social value outside of reproductive capabilities. According to Anthony Preus and his seminal summary of ancient reproductive theories, later scientific thinking somewhat softened Aeschylus' strict binaries.²⁶ Aristotle (fourth century BCE) concedes that the female provides the matter while the male provides the source of movement and change, but L. Foxhall adds that any appearance of progress regarding this female contribution is unfortunately tempered by the ancient view of matter: "For Aristotle,

²³ Pomeroy 1995, 60.

²⁴ See discussion in Pomeroy 1995, 60ff.

²⁵ Aeschylus 2009, 439.

²⁶ Preus 1977.

the 'female' was a passive and incoherent 'matter', while the male was active, structuring 'form'. Form and matter are hierarchically related, form being the 'intelligent', guiding element while matter is the element shaped by form."²⁷ In the second century CE, Galen concedes that *pneuma* (spirit or life-force) is indeed provided by both male and female seed, but that "female seed serves as food for the semen in its development."²⁸ DeConick locates this continued understanding of the inferiority of female seed within Gnostic myth itself: the seed of Sophia, unaided by the assistance of any male contribution, is indeed able to produce a form. "The resulting offspring, however, would be weak and deficient in some way just as the female seed was weaker and imperfect."²⁹ Seed mattered, and the quality of the seed mattered. To concede to a woman the role of her seed in the formation of the offspring's body is a small concession indeed.

A woman's duty to her family and state was therefore to offer her body as a reliable conduit for the production of male heirs. As such, both custom and law worked together to isolate the female body *into* the hands of the patriarch and *away* from other forces, forces such as the woman's own sexuality or the actions of other men, forces that might act independently from the patriarch's agenda. On a practical level, this isolation of power was best achieved by hiding the female body from view, and women were consequently relegated to domestic spaces.³⁰ Given a woman's duty to the state to perpetuate male progeny, her body's central role in this duty, and the necessity of a woman's loyalty in such a system, one could never be too careful. A woman's body was at its best when hidden.

Any understanding of rape as a crime must therefore be framed within this paradigm. Rape was not a crime against the body of a woman.³¹ Rape was a crime against the man for whom the woman's body carried heirs, a crime that used the patriarch's property against him. In Athenian courts, the rapist was often accused of *hubris*, as in, an act intended to humiliate and to shame. Key to this understanding, however, is that this *hubris* was not an attempt to shame the woman but to shame the patriarch. To be even more specific, the woman's body was not the central concern.³² Of concern was what her body carried on behalf of the patriarch, especially if what she carried was not begotten of

²⁷ Foxhall 2013, 71.

²⁸ Preus 1977, 83.

²⁹ DeConick 2003, 323.

³⁰ Pomeroy 1995, 29.

³¹ Omitowoju 2002a, 35.

³² "The issue of female consent is never prioritized as the central concern for the regulation of sexual behavior." Omitowoju 2002b, 3.

the patriarch's seed.³³ Pomeroy words it brilliantly if not ironically when she writes, "Seclusion is the handmaiden of protection," but it is essential to keep in mind *what*, ultimately, is being protected.³⁴ To rape a woman was one of the most heinous crimes one man could commit against another, and therefore secluding women's bodies was key to preventing it.

As a symbolic artifact and construction of the Greek "historical moment," the female body indeed manifests the values of its culture. Greek society considered a woman's body as the physical property of the patriarch, but it was far more than that. It served as the irreplaceable centerpiece in a struggle for power and perpetuity. As such, it was essential to allow *only* the patriarch to wield power over the woman who belonged to him and to protect her body from other, violent forces that might act independently of him. The desires of other men, or even the sexuality of the woman herself, must be denied access, or the stability of the entire system threatened to unravel.

The categories of violence and protection are cleanest and clearest in Athens. My inquiry only begins there, however, because the social milieu of Sophia mythology is not Greek, but Roman. It is therefore essential to extend the inquiry and to ask some fundamental questions: Do these categories still exist in the provenance of Sophia mythology, especially since wealth in Roman society often granted a Roman matron access to the public sphere? If a woman's body has emerged from hiding, what does that mean? Has it ceased to represent the patriarchal urgency to maintain untainted reproductive functionality?

To answer in short, the lens is as viable as ever. It is beyond doubt that wealthy Roman matrons enjoyed more freedom than their Greek predecessors.³⁵ But merely increasing visibility of the female body in public places did not signify that the female body ceased to be defined in terms of its reproductive capacities. Quite the contrary: increased visibility merely meant that the patriarchal use of a woman's body could now exceed the walls of the house. Furthermore, this visibility came laden with rules of its own: modesty, chastity, and domesticity continued to be the ideal, even—especially!—in public.

In her insightful discussion of modesty in late antiquity, Kate Wilkinson demonstrates that the public visibility of a woman, rather than negating

33 Pierce 2002, 177.

34 Pomeroy 1995, 59. For further discussion on rape in Greece but through the lens of New Comedy, see Pierce 2002.

35 "The upper-class Roman woman—at least from the time of the late Republic—had far more freedom than the woman of similar status in Classical Athens. The Roman woman had choices; the Athenian had none ... Roman women were involved with their culture and were able to influence their society, whereas the Athenian women were isolated and excluded from activities outside the home." Pomeroy 1995, 188–9.

her idealized domesticity, instead publicly extended it. The woman's newly-obtained visibility was an opportunity to convince the Roman public of her "domestic virtue," not—and again this is key—for her own sake, but for the sake of her household.³⁶ Her body continued to be conceived as a means to an end, used by the patriarch to maintain the impeccability of his household, his prestige, and his power. Her visibility has not changed the basic categories but rather extended them.

The function of this female visibility surpassed, however, mere representation for one household. It also burgeoned the interests of the state. Visibility did not *replace* reproduction; it was a *reward* for reproduction. The first century CE Augustinian legislation indeed offered women access to the public sphere independent of male guardianship, but it came at a price: "The legislation of Augustus provided a way for women to free themselves of the formal supervision by male guardians. According to the 'right of three or four children' (*jus liberorum*), a freeborn woman who bore three children and a freedwoman who bore four children were exempt from guardianship."³⁷ Women of a certain economic echelon who met the state guidelines via fecundity were suddenly freed from certain aspects of male guardianship.³⁸

The motivation behind these reforms, however, was not a suddenly enlightened evaluation of the women's body beyond its reproductive function. The motivation behind these reforms was a profound state concern to burgeon reproduction among Rome's highest-ranking classes while simultaneously maintaining its own power in the midst of such burgeoning. When the wealthiest families multiplied, not only did this populate the republic with the "best" seed, it also dispersed and therefore decentralized wealth among the many heirs, decreasing their possible political clout. In either case, the state benefited, and the female body was central to its success.³⁹

That rape too continued to be interpreted as an affront against the patriarch and even state is evident in the foundational narrative of the Roman Republic's birth: the rape of Lucretia. The wife of the powerful consul Collatinus, Lucretia awakens one night to find in her bedroom the last Etruscan king, Sextus. On pain of accusations of adultery, Lucretia submits to his sexual advances but then kills herself in shame. Her aggrieved husband parades her body around the Forum, inciting the Roman aristocracy to revolution and to the foundation of the Roman republic. "For the ancient Romans, her death was not about

³⁶ Wilkinson 2015, 59, 85. See also the work of Milnor 2005, 104, 109, 139.

³⁷ Pomeroy 1995, 151.

³⁸ Milnor 2005, 153.

³⁹ Hallett 2012, 374.

her own innocence or guilt, but instead the rape of Lucretia symbolized a serious disorder in society.⁴⁰ At the heart of the Roman Republic's very self-understanding is the body of a woman, the epicenter of male claims to power.

The textual evidence therefore indicates that by the time Gnostic communities penned their mythologies, the cultural values constructing the female body continued to center on that body's duty to home and state. Women's bodies were still valued for stable reproduction. Rape was still considered a crime against a woman's father or husband, would-be progeny, and the state. A cloaked body—either within the home or underneath modest dress—was still the preferred corrective. Wealthy women's enlarged access to the public sphere does not suggest that male interest in or desire for control over the female reproductive capacity have lessened but rather shifted.

As a symbolic artifact, the female body, replete with the historical values that constructed it, is therefore fully able to migrate from its historical context to the literary context of Gnostic mythology. The female body's central role in the patriarchal struggle for power and perpetuity, and therefore that body's susceptibility to the twin manifestations of that power—violence and protection—becomes most visible in the stories centered on the youngest female goddess, Sophia. From a feminist perspective, it makes sense to begin with the lowest-ranking female goddess rather than the highest. For example, Chandra Talpade Mohany's work on globalization has yielded the tremendously helpful insight that if an epistemological frame begins with those in power, it will render invisible the real conditions of the least powerful.⁴¹ Epistemologically speaking, then, the most fertile ground for understanding what Gnostic mythology can reveal about patriarchy is not found with the highest aeon but with the lowest. It is to a close reading of four stories about this youngest aeon, Sophia, that we now turn.

4 The Female Body in Gnostic Mythology

In the beginning was balance. The highest God, the great spirit, brought forth from himself pairs of aeons, each male-female, thus both creating and sustaining perfect stability in the realm of light. All was well until the youngest aeon, Sophia, desired to know what she was not meant to know (the sexually-charged character of this verb *know* must not be missed) and to act without

40 Salisbury 2001, 197.

41 Mohanty 2003, 234.

her male consort, leading to her expulsion from the highest heights into evil matter, where oppressors are waiting.

But all the material emanations of the Authates surrounded her.

And the great lion-faced light-power swallowed the powers of light in Sophia, and he purified (σωτηρ) her light and swallowed it, and her matter was cast into chaos ...

But when these things happened, Sophia became exceedingly weak.

And again that lion-faced light-power began to take away all the light powers in Sophia.

And the material powers of Authades surrounded Sophia at the same time, and they oppressed (επιβαίνει) her.⁴²

4.1 *Pistis Sophia*

The violence perpetrated against Sophia's body is, in a word, relentless. Multiple aggressors close in around her, swallowing and devouring the light within until she is exhausted (ἀπέργων εμάρτυρος εμάρτυρος), but there is more to come. Thirteen times Sophia will cry to the light of lights for deliverance. Six more times her oppressors return to steal the light from her body, nearly but never completely managing to extinguish it completely.⁴³ The light world finally dispatches a would-be rescuer who, after himself witnessing an instance of her oppression, carries Sophia away to the higher chaos, only for her pursuers to find her, drag her down, and oppress her again.⁴⁴ In the end, two angels carry her on their shoulders and return her to her home, where the remnants of her remaining light are re-illuminated to full strength.⁴⁵

Despite this gratuitous violence unleashed upon her body, it is not her body itself that is of concern to the author but the light which her body contains, the remnant of her divine home. The narrator's technique in this text is repetition, a remarkable insistence of the oppressors' goal to take her *whole light* (πλογοειν τηρητι), a refrain whose repetition is matched only by the equally repetitive report, "But they could not do it."⁴⁶ For example, Jesus foreshadows in his prologue to Sophia's fourth repentance that the powers will return to afflict

⁴² Pist. Soph. AC 1.31 (Schmidt and MacDermot 46). *επιβαίνει*, Crum 742b, is often translated in this context as "oppress" or "press her sore." This verb is used to express dire circumstances in which a victim is increasingly overpowered by another, such as "in the straits of death," "narrowed," or "shutting in a tight-fitting space."

⁴³ Pist. Soph. AC 1.41, 47, 48, 52, 55; 2.66 (Schmidt and MacDermot 137).

⁴⁴ Pist. Soph. AC 2.66 (Schmidt and MacDermot 137).

⁴⁵ Pist. Soph. AC 2.66 (Schmidt and MacDermot 137).

⁴⁶ Pist. Soph. AC 1.41, 47, 48, 52, 55; 2.66 (Schmidt and MacDermot 137).

Sophia a second time, “for the purpose of taking *all the remaining light* within her.”⁴⁷ Sophia herself, during her eighth repentance, reports her own assault: “They desired to take *all my light* from me.”⁴⁸ Later, however, thinking she has finally escaped their clutches (she has not), she praises, “But they were not able to take it.”⁴⁹ The narratival technique is therefore an earnest repetition of multiple failed attempts on Sophia’s light.

Why are the oppressors so focused on complete thievery, and why is it so important that they fail? Sophia herself reveals the answer: the light which they seek to steal, even though it can be found in her body, does not belong to her. In her penultimate repentance, she divulges a key detail: “They did not spare me and they oppressed (σωξ.) the one who *they took his light and his power*.”⁵⁰ The light in Sophia’s body is not her light at all but the light of her father. Sophia’s body is the tragic battleground on which enemies wage war against the Light of Lights: they do not seek to oppress Sophia but to oppress him, and they do so by enacting violence against the female body.

This, then, is why it is so important that they fail: the narrator seeks to hide some aspect of Sophia’s body from violence so that the battle against the high God can never succeed. Her body is not her own: it is the vessel that carries within it something that belongs to Someone Else. Secure in the high heavens, her body (and what it carries) is safe. Outside the protection of its home, however, this body is susceptible to forces acting upon it outside the purview of the highest God.

4.2 *On the Origin of the World*

In *On the Origin of the World*, Sophia and the lion-faced power (Ialdabaoth) again make an appearance but with striking differences. First, Sophia is Ialdabaoth’s mother, but their relationship is complicated: on the one hand, Ialdabaoth “results from her defect,” but on the other hand, she creates him deliberately.⁵¹ A second striking difference is that the violence in the text is not against Sophia but against her daughter, Zoe-being-called-Eve.

While the language in *Pistis Sophia* suggests sexual violence, in *On the Origin of the World* the language of rape is unmistakable. The scene of sexual

47 Pist Soph. AC 1.39 (Schmidt and MacDermot 63): ετρεγκι ἀπεκεογοειν τηρη ετῆγητε.

48 Pist. Soph. AC 1.55.16 (Schmidt and MacDermot 106): αγογεωδι πλογοιν τηρη πῆγητ.

49 Pist. Soph. AC 1.58.7 (Schmidt and MacDermot 113): αγω νεμπιογεωφιτη. For other examples of the narratival insistence either of the oppressors’ desire to steal the totality of Sophia’s light or the report that they were not successful, see 1.32.15, 1.35.10, 1.48.13, 1.50.25, 1.52, 1.58.8.

50 Pist. Soph. AC 1.55.16 (Schmidt and MacDermot 106).

51 Orig. World NHC II,5 99.29 (Bethge 1989, 14).

assault itself is set in the garden of Eden. As is customary in the Gnostics' subversive interpretation of biblical events, Eden appears not as paradise but as a place of imprisonment. Adam lies inert, created by the powers but unable to stand due to their own deficiency of spirit.⁵² Sent by her mother Sophia, Zoe/Eve enters a female body, arrives in paradise, and successfully raises Adam to life.⁵³ When the archons find Adam standing and awakened, the emissaries sent to investigate become enamored of the luminous woman standing by Adam's side and scheme to lay hold of her and cast their seed into her.

Already the scene is charged with reproductive energy: the narrator is clearly interested in the intersection between the progeny of the male characters and female body's role in carrying that progeny. The reason Sophia sends Eve, for example, is to awaken Adam "so that those whom he should engender (ἀποού) might become containers of light."⁵⁴ As for the emissaries themselves, their purpose in casting their seed into the woman is twofold: not only will it keep the woman from "descending into her light," most importantly "those whom she will bear (ἀποού), they will be subordinated to us."⁵⁵ As in *Pistis Sophia*, the intention behind the violence against the female body is not necessarily about that body itself but about what that body could possibly contain and what it could be used to accomplish.

In the midst of this violence, the narrator protects the female body and the possibility of male power enacted upon it through a fascinating narratival technique possible only in myth: Eve foils their plot by leaving her bodily likeness and becoming a tree.⁵⁶ Not knowing that the true Eve has slipped their grasp, the deceived archons seize the female body, a material body of their own making now stripped of the divine spirit of the spiritual Eve.

And they behaved with audacity.

They came up to her. They seized her. They cast their seed down upon her.

They did this deceitfully, defiling her not only naturally but abominably, defiling the seal of her voice first ... for the purpose of defiling those who say at the end of the age that upon the Word they came into being by the True Man.

⁵² Orig. *World* NHC II,5 115.28–30 (Bethge 1989, 66).

⁵³ Orig. *World* NHC II,5 115.30–116.9 (Bethge 1989, 66).

⁵⁴ Orig. *World* NHC II,5 115.35–36 (Bethge 1989, 66).

⁵⁵ Orig. *World* NHC II,5 116.17–30 (Bethge 1989, 66–8).

⁵⁶ Orig. *World* NHC II,5 116.25–33 (Bethge 1989, 68).

And they were misled, not knowing that it was their own body they defiled. It was this that the authorities and their angels defiled in every way.⁵⁷

The graphic violence itself is troubling enough, but it is essential to note the stated intention *behind* the violence. The envisioned victim is not the woman herself but her progeny: in apocalyptic terms, “those who say at the end of the age that upon the Word they came into being by the True Man.” By defiling Eve, they defile those whom Eve will beget—clearly the self-understanding of the community behind the formation of this text—thus stripping them of the claim to be born of the True Man.

As in *Pistis Sophia*, the female body is the battleground on which enemies wage their war. But unlike *Pistis Sophia*, the intended violence here is not directed backward (toward the high God) but forward (toward future generations). The scene’s simultaneous victory and mockery ultimately center on the woman’s body, which the archons clumsily attempt to use for their own purposes. Instead, they are twice outwitted: the spiritual Eve’s escape from her material body means that not only have the archons failed in their plot against future progeny, they have ignorantly defiled a body that belongs to them. By successfully hiding Eve’s body, the narrator has thwarted the violence’s intended outcome and shamed the perpetrators.

4.3 *Hypostasis of the Archons*

Scholars have long noted the close similarities between *On the Origin of the World* and the text that precedes it in the codex, the *Hypostasis of the Archons*.⁵⁸ Like *On the Origin of the World*, in the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, Ialdabaoth is the offspring of Sophia, who “wanted to create something, alone without her consort.”⁵⁹ Also similar is the scene of assault: the violence is against the “spirit-endowed woman” who awakens Adam, whom she finds lying inert upon the ground.⁶⁰ The narratival technique is the same: the spiritual Eve once again escapes the archons by transforming into a tree.⁶¹ The punchline is the same: the double deception of the duped archons.⁶² The true victim of the violence is also the same: not the woman herself but the progeny

57 Orig. World NHC 11,5 117.2–14 (Bethge 1989, 68).

58 “Both works could be based upon some of the same source material: this would account for the connection, better than assuming a relationship of direct dependence or of immediate successive acts of composition.” Bethge 1989, 13.

59 Hyp. Arch. NHC 11,4 94.6–7 (Layton 1989, 252).

60 Hyp. Arch. NHC 11,4 89.11–17 (Layton 1989, 240).

61 Hyp. Arch. NHC 11,4 89.23–26 (Layton 1989, 240).

62 Hyp. Arch. NHC 11,4 89.26–30 (Layton 1989, 242).

her body might carry. The two documents do, however, display a crucial difference, because it is in the Hypostasis of the Archons that the reader meets the great Norea.⁶³

Following the births of Cain, Abel, and Seth, Eve becomes pregnant and bears a daughter, “Norea, a virgin and assistant for generation upon generation of humankind.”⁶⁴ Norea’s birth account differs substantially from those of her brothers—indeed, *half*-brothers. While the birth accounts of Cain, Abel, and Seth all contain at least some hint of their probable paternity, Norea’s birth account is remarkably terse and unilaterally focused upon the women: “Again Eve was pregnant and she bore Norea.”⁶⁵ Not only does this short account centralize Eve and Norea to the exclusion of any mention of males, it also renders ambiguous the precise relationship between Eve and Norea. The full ramifications of the dearth of details remain unrealized until the moment Norea captures the attention of the archons, who demand that she “render service” to them, jeering, “As did your mother.”⁶⁶ Norea, however, knows the truth. She counters,

You did not know my mother,
 But it was your own likeness that you knew.
 For I am not from you (εβολ γῆ τηνε),
 But it is from the heavens (εβολ γῆ να πα ητηε) that I am.⁶⁷

Norea’s declaration to the archons, the declaration which renders them powerless against her, solves the matter once and for all: she was borne, not of the material Eve violated by the archons, but of the spiritual Eve whom the narrator hid from them.

The Hypostasis of the Archons is therefore unique because it does not narrate one account of sexual assault. It narrates two. The deep interrelation of these two accounts illustrates well the true value of a female body in its historical context. The body was important because parentage was important. A community could only claim Norea as their spiritual parent if both she and her mother remained protected from violence and free from defilement. The narrator did not protect Eve’s body for its own sake but for the sake of what

63 For a full description of Norea, her Jewish background, and the Gnostic inversion of her portrayal as a “Jewish naughty-girl,” see Pearson 1988.

64 Hyp. Arch. NHC II,4 91.1–2 (Layton 1989, 244).

65 Hyp. Arch. NHC II,4 91.35 (Layton 1989, 246).

66 Hyp. Arch. NHC II,4 92.30–33 (Layton 1989, 248).

67 Hyp. Arch. NHC II,4 92.22–26 (Layton 1989, 248).

that body might someday carry, for the advent of Norea and eventually the community who claimed her unsullied, spiritual nature.

On a deeper level, however, the interrelatedness of these stories illustrates the centrality of the female body in claims of power. The body was important because power was important. The narrator's decision to protect the spiritual Eve gave Norea far more than an undefiled parental line. It gave her power. The thwarted assault in the garden is key to thwarted assault here, because central to Norea's ability to subvert the archons' claims over her is her bold revelation of her true parentage: she would never be free to do so if she was their daughter. Norea's agency over her body in this story is remarkable, but it is essential to remember the *source* of this agency: it is a gift, achieved on Norea's behalf by the non-assault of Norea's mother. It is also essential to remember the *function* of this agency: it, too, is a gift—not ultimately to Norea, but to her progeny.

4.4 *The Apocryphon of John*

In the widely circulated the Apocryphon of John, Sophia's error in the creation centers on unfettered sexuality gone awry. This account radiates anxiety surrounding the possibility of female sexuality acting on the female body apart from the endorsement of the male agenda.

And Sophia of the Epinoia, being an aeon, thought a thought from within
 herself with the conception of the invisible Spirit and Foreknowledge.
 She desired to manifest a likeness from herself
 without (ᾳχμή) the consent of the Spirit
 he did not approve
 and without (ᾳχμή) her consort
 and without (ᾳχμή) his consideration ...
 And because of the invincible power which is in her,
 her thought did not remain idle.
 And an imperfect product manifested from her,
 being different than her likeness,
 because she created it without (ᾳχμή) her consort.⁶⁸

The story as told in the Apocryphon of John is literally the worst-case scenario, a cautionary tale of what might possibly occur when the female body is susceptible to forces independent of the patriarch. The narrator is clearly interested

68 Apoc. John NHC 9.25–10.5 (Waldenstein and Wisse 1995, 24–5). Here, for the sake of space, I have omitted lines 31–32, which stress three more times that any male permission was emphatically withheld from Sophia's actions.

in stressing the autonomous and therefore degraded nature of Sophia's choices: two male authority figures in the narrative (the father-like Spirit and husband-like consort) do not approve. A female, armed with "invincible power which is in her," has run amok, acting independently of the patriarchal agenda. Realizing her error, Sophia falls from the pleroma where she finds her light diminished because (lest the reader forget) "her consort had not agreed with her."⁶⁹ Eventually the pleroma answers her repentance, weeping, and shame with a half-rescue: "She was taken up not to her own aeon but above her son, that she might be in the ninth until she has corrected her deficiency."⁷⁰

As before, the would-be solution occurs in Eden, but here there are crucial differences: exposure rather than protection, disaster rather than salvation. The female character, Epinoia, arrives in Eden not separate from Adam but hidden within him, smuggled there by Sophia via the breath of the ignorant Ialdabaoth. In this text, the narrative flow is therefore reversed: rather than moving from exposure to hiddenness, the woman's body is originally hidden and later becomes exposed. Also reversed is the function of the narrative: if the texts outlined above celebrate the possibilities when a woman's body is protected in the midst of violence, the Apocryphon of John mourns the ramifications of exposure.

In this text, the luminous Ennoia begins in a state of hiddenness, safely concealed within Adam "in order that the archons should not know her."⁷¹ It is she who lends Adam luminosity, and it is her residency within him that awakens him and encourages him to disobey the chief archon, who seeks always to rule and imprison him. Unfortunately, this hiddenness cannot be sustained:

And [the chief archon] knew that [Adam] was disobedient to him
because of the light of Epinoia which existed in him,
which made him in his thinking greater than the archon.
And the archon desired to bring the power out
which he himself had given to him ...
Then the Epinoia of light, she hid within him.
And the chief archon desired to bring her out of his rib.
But the Epinoia of light, she is unattainable ...
He brought a part of his power out from him
and he created another form in a shape of a woman.⁷²

⁶⁹ Apoc. John NHC 13.17 (Waldenstein and Wisse 1995, 79).

⁷⁰ Apoc. John NHC 14.9–13 (Waldenstein and Wisse 1995, 83).

⁷¹ Apoc. John NHC 20.26 (Waldenstein and Wisse 1995, 54).

⁷² Apoc. John NHC 22.15–35 (Waldenstein and Wisse 1995, 59–61).

This exposure of the previously hidden female character is her downfall: when the chief archon beholds the newly created Eve, he defiles her (ᾳωξι) and by her begets Cain and Abel. Next comes Seth, the child of Adam and Eve and thus free from archonian parentage, the founder of the great race championed by Sethians.

The archon strikes again. Recognizing that the Sethians have exceeded him in thought and that he himself has failed multiple attempts to seize this thought for himself, the chief archon changes his strategy: if he cannot surpass the divine seed, he will imprison it. “He took counsel with his authorities, which are his powers, and they together committed together adultery (ΠΝΟΕΙΚ) with Sophia, and through them they begot bitter Fate.”⁷³

Gone is any narratival technique that might function to hide and save the woman’s body, which is exactly the point. Having performed her function as the conduit of this destructive offspring, the exposed Sophia disappears from the story, but not before she has served her literary purpose. She has illustrated the danger of unharnessed feminine sexuality, as well as the danger of the exposed female body, now vulnerable to the aggression of enemies. The reproductive power within a woman must be managed at all costs, for when it is not, behold the consequences: the birth of Fate, the great enemy of the high God and his divine seed, “the last of the changeable fetters.”⁷⁴ When the female body is exposed and rendered vulnerable to forces other than the patriarch, disaster ensues: one male character claims victory over another by commandeering the reproductive capacities of the exposed female body.

5 Protected for a Purpose

Mining a mythological text for hints of the historical status of the community that formed it is indeed a precarious enterprise. A model that begins by understanding the body as a constructed symbolic artifact is nevertheless an invaluable entry point. The body’s status as a constructed entity in its historical context gives it the ability to reappear in a literary context with the values of its “particular historical moment” intact. In antiquity, the female body could be used responsibly for the stable perpetuation of untainted seed, or it could be used dangerously, either by violent aggressors committing *hubris* against patriarch or by the woman’s own independent volition. To avoid exposure to these

73 Apoc. John NHC 28.11–15 (Waldenstein and Wisse 1995, 74).

74 Apoc. John NHC 28.15 (Waldenstein and Wisse 1995, 74).

exterior forces, law and culture encouraged hiding the body, either at home (as in Athens) or in plain sight (as in Rome).

When viewed against this historical backdrop, the details of the violence and preservation of Sophia and her daughters come together in a coherent whole, and the underlying concerns of the narratives become clear. The youngest female aeon, Sophia, attempts to do what it is beyond her given station to do, an error often described in sexual terms. She finds herself outside the protection of her father's home, where violence awaits the exposed female body. These forces—the woman's independent volition, or the aggression of enemies outside her home—put the body at risk. These violent forces are certainly not an attack on the woman, but neither are they exactly an attack on the body *per se*. They are a violent appropriation of what the body can accomplish, thus endangering the stable and unsullied lineage essential to the agenda of ancient patriarchy. An attack on the body of Sophia/Eve/Norea/Epinoia looks past that body and ultimately attacks what is beyond it.

These are high stakes, and the authors of these Gnostic myths, highly vested in not only the honor of the God they worshipped but also in their own self-identity, hurried to protect the exposed female body to retain it for proper use. Embedded within these descriptions of sexual violence are narrative moments of hiddenness which preserve what the body contains on behalf of either the patriarch before her or the progeny after her. When these narratival techniques disappear and the woman and her reproductive capacity are exposed, the effect is catastrophic: not for her, but for those whose destinies flow through body and are inextricably linked to it.

It is no coincidence that these stories are framed in exactly this way. The historical context admirably accounts for not only the violence against the bodies of Sophia and her daughters but also for their preservation. Sophia mythology constructs the woman's body as the epicenter of two opposing but equal manifestations of patriarchal power—violence and protection—in this power's urgency to reproduce itself. Rather than withstanding the power of patriarchy by including the divine feminine, Gnostic myth upholds patriarchal values in its portrayal of the female body as a construction thoroughly embedded with the ideology of the historical context that produced it.

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